
McClatchy Washington Bureau

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Posted on Sun, Sep. 09, 2007

'Murderabilia' are hot Internet items

Les Blumenthal | McClatchy Newspapers

last updated: September 07, 2007 10:22:55 PM

WASHINGTON — Round and chrome, it looks a lot like your average hubcap from a vintage VW Bug. But this one is special. And it's for sale.

It's off the tan 1968 Volkswagen Beetle that Ted Bundy drove as he roamed the West in the mid-1970s murdering young women. From Washington state to Colorado to Utah, Bundy is considered among the most diabolical serial killers in U.S. history.

Though he was executed in Florida's electric chair more than 18 years ago, anything connected to Bundy is a hot commodity in "murderabilia" — items offered by a handful of Web sites that cater to those fascinated by the nation's most notorious killers.

The starting bid for the hubcap from Bundy's Beetle is \$3,500. If that's too steep, how about \$1,700 for a signed note that Bundy smuggled to another prisoner on Florida's death row? A copy of Bundy's last will and testament, in which he asks that his ashes be spread over the Cascade Mountains, where he dumped the bodies of some of his victims, goes for \$15.

Along with Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer and David "Son of Sam" Berkowitz, Bundy's stuff is the most sought after, said Andy Kahan, director of the Houston mayor's crime victims office. Kahan has tracked the sale of murderabilia for eight years and has led the effort to limit such sales. Even more recent serial killers, including Gary Ridgway, the Green River killer who confessed to murdering 48 women in Washington state, are represented on the Web sites. The opening bid for an envelope hand-addressed by Ridgway, postmarked from Seattle just weeks after his arrest, is \$100. Also available, for \$4.99, is a glossy photo of Ridgway in court wearing a white jail jumpsuit with "Ultra Security Inmate" stenciled across the back.

"This is really upsetting," said Susanne Villiamin of Seattle, the mother of Mary Sue Bello, one of Ridgway's victims. "This brings back memories. I've not gotten over it. I can't forgive him."

Rep. Dave Reichert, R-Wash., a former King County sheriff who tracked the Green River killer for years and even sought advice from Bundy during an interview on death row, said he, too, was upset by the murderabilia market.

"The families of these victims experience enormous, life-consuming pain by the crime itself and don't deserve this horrible, additional exploitation," Reichert said in a statement.

Several years ago, Kahan helped persuade eBay to stop trading in murderabilia, only to see dealers launch their own Web sites.

"They are like cockroaches," he said. "People have always been interested in the macabre, but this is nauseating."

Five states — Texas, California, New Jersey, Michigan and Utah — have passed laws aimed at limiting such sales. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, has introduced legislation that would prohibit state and federal prisoners from mailing such items.

"The more notorious, the more violent the crime, the more morbid curiosity some people have," Cornyn said. "For all the upsides and benefits of the Internet, this is sort of the dark side of technology."

Reichert said he would take a "hard look" at introducing similar legislation in the House.

Some prisoners benefit from the sales of their memorabilia. Others have no idea that the letters, autographs, photos and virtually everything else they touch are being auctioned off, Kahan said. Some dealers will correspond with serial killers in an effort to secure items they can sell without letting the killers know what they are up to, he added.

Bundy was sentenced to death in Florida for the killings of two Florida State University sorority sisters and a 12-year-old girl. While awaiting his execution, he confessed to roughly 40 murders, though the total number of killings will never be known.

Kahan said Bundy has become a cult figure who has been immortalized in movies and books and whose popularity in the murderabilia markets is understandable.

"He was charismatic, good-looking for a serial killer, and he sought attention. He had a huge ego," Kahan said. "Like it or not, he was on a pedestal."

Tod Bohannon operates the Web site www.muderauction.com and is a collector. He had hair from Manson, artwork from Texas serial killer Elmer Wayne Henley and hundreds of letters from convicted murders.

In addition to the Bundy hub cap, his Web site is offering a Manson fingerprint chart, a Zodiac killer wanted poster and a tracing of serial killer Alfred Gaynor's right hand.

Bohannon said most of what he offers can be authenticated, including the Bundy hubcap. The hubcap was removed from the vehicle in 2002 after the VW was purchased at a Salt Lake City police auction by a deputy sheriff.

Bohannon said he and other collectors are being treated unfairly. He said efforts to limit such sales would violate their constitutional rights to free expression.

“The media has a lot to do with who is sought after,” Bohannon said. “It’s all about sensationalism. I think people have been collecting stuff like this since the days of the Old West. People probably have old guns tucked away.”

Terry Hinds' sister, Cynthia, disappeared in August 1982. Her body was found five days later, another victim of the Green River killer.

Hinds said he wasn’t aware that anyone was selling stuff linked to serial killers. Those who traffic in it, he said, shouldn’t be profiting.

“Of course it upsets me,” he said. “If anyone is making money off this, it should go to the families.”

(Dave Montgomery contributed to this story.)